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**Veterans' stories tell why today is so special**

**By Dennis McCarthy**

**Columnist**

**Sunday, July 03, 2005** - They're the spirit of Independence Day - a group of military veterans still serving their country 60 years after World War II as volunteers at the Sepulveda VA.

They got together Friday to give the nation a Fourth of July birthday present - a handful of digitized CDs headed for the Library of Congress.

Each, in its own way, explains why we're able to have our backyard barbecues, park picnics and fireworks shows this weekend to celebrate our country's 229th birthday.

Celebrate our freedom - which was anything but free.

It all could have been so different today if generations of courageous American men and women hadn't stood up to the bullies of the world.

If Joe Pietroforte hadn't picked up a bazooka and disabled a line of German tanks heading straight for his men in Company G. His courage won him a Silver Star and the nickname Bazooka Joe from his WWII buddies.

It all could have all been different if the shrapnel in Pete Howenstein's neck had stopped him from firing on the approaching enemy, but it didn't. And for that, Gen. George Patton himself pinned the Bronze Star and Purple Heart on Howenstein as he recovered in a field hospital.

Different if Mary Cobb hadn't volunteered as an Army nurse and flown to war-torn England, where she cared for soldiers wounded in the Battle of the Bulge.

If Phyllis Capelle hadn't logged more than 250 hours stateside, flying aircraft to military bases, and ferrying wounded soldiers to hospitals and back home.

Different if Marine Dave Swerdlow hadn't found the courage to charge up those hills in the teeth of enemy gunfire on Iwo Jima, and later watch a handful of his buddies raise an American flag that sent a shiver of pride through an entire nation.

Etching in our minds forever that freedom is anything but free.

It's all right there on the CDs these courageous men and women - the spirit of Independence Day - are recording for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. For the nation.

It's called the Veterans History Project, and whatever you think about government programs, this is one they got right.

Mandated by Congress, it's a massive undertaking to give every war veteran the chance to sit in front of a video camera and forever preserve their contribution in keeping this country free.

The CDs are being placed in the permanent archives of the United States, preserved by the Library of Congress.

"If you go to any military Web site, you see they're filled with requests from young people asking for any information about what their late fathers and grandfathers did in the war," said Becky James, who is in charge of interviewing local vets at the Sepulveda VA.

"They want to know because many combat war veterans came home and never talked with their families about what they did. One woman came up to me crying after watching the video her husband made.

"They had been married 50 years, and this was the first time he had opened up and talked about his war experiences to anyone. All the interviews are very emotional."

James and her staff of volunteers have compiled 25 CDs from local vets, with 50 more waiting to be interviewed. These are men and women who served in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq.

From VA hospitals all over the country, 200 to 300 CDs are coming in to Washington, D.C., every week. More than 25,000 are backlogged, yet to be put on line.

A special push is on to get the older vets to tell their stories now.

"We have to do it now, or it may be never," James said, watching a few WWII vets gather around a small TV set to watch the CD of 82-year-old Mary Cobb talk about caring for those boys wounded in the Battle of the Bulge.

"Your grandchildren are going to be proud," Bazooka Joe said. "So are yours, Joe," Mary replied.

The spirit of Independence Day. Why we're all able to enjoy our backyard barbecues, park picnics and fireworks shows this weekend.

For information on the Veterans History Project, call (888) 371-5848. To view the CDs, see [www.loc.gov/folklife/vets](http://www.loc.gov/folklife/vets).